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ABSTRACT

The economic shifts of the past decade represent a new era in the U.S. workplace. Many of the millions of dislocated managers and professionals will not be reemployed in similar jobs because those jobs have disappeared. The economy has changed from the pyramid shape that most people envision, with a large blue-collar base and a smaller white-collar top, to a diamond shape, with a small tip of managers and owners, a large middle of worker-producers, whether white or blue collar, and a small layer of clerical workers. In this new economy, people must find new ways of working. Many are becoming entrepreneurs. Others are retraining in a variety of technical occupations. All, however, must constantly learn new skills and new ways to apply old skills as the economy continues to change. Workers must become generalists, able to do a variety of things. In order to do so, they need college programs to which they can return throughout their lives. Lifelong learning must become a way of life for the workers of the present and the future. (KC)

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Changing Economy

CAREER SHIFTING

Over in a Changing Economy

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CAREER

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CAREER SHIFTING

Shifting Gears in a Changing Workplace

by William A. Charland, Jr.

Jobs can change overnight.

Labor market analysts estimate that each year in America one-third of our job roles are in transition, one-third of our technical skills turn obsolescent, and one-third of our workers leave their jobs.

That's the challenge of a changing economy. The question is how to maintain our careers in a workplace that is constantly in transition.

Not long ago I was talking with a manager in a large corporation outside Denver. Several thousand managers in that company were to be let go the following year, and it was conceivable that he could be among them.

Somehow we got talking about a couple who had changed careers and bought a barbecue restaurant in the mountain resort community of Steamboat Springs, Colorado. I was exclaiming about their barbecue sauce and their lifestyle in the mountains when I noticed that I seemed to have lost the corporate manager's attention. He was staring out his office window, toward the mountains.

"Herb," I said. "Are you still here?"

"I'm not sure," he answered. "You know I've been fooling with a barbecue sauce for several years. Some of my friends have told me I should market it ..."

Today, many people are finding ways to grow with the changing times — sometimes in the midst of personal challenges. One of my favorite examples is Joan Duncan, a woman in her 60s who found herself floundering a few years ago when her marriage of 30 years ended in divorce.

Duncan is a bright, capable person. In addition to raising several children, she had served for some years as Mayor of Cherry Hills Village, a small suburb of Denver. But suddenly she was cast adrift on the job market with no apparent marketable skills.

Taking stock of her situation, Duncan enrolled in some word processing classes at a community college and hired out as a temporary worker. It was a comedown from her role as Mayor of Cherry Hills Village, working under someone else's direction instead of exercising leadership herself. But

it was also a broadening experience; gradually she began to see a new career in it.

Duncan noticed that a number of women her age were flailing about in the labor market, learning office skills and looking for work as temporaries. There were more than a few older men out looking for work as well. Often the older people seemed to get lost in a marketplace crowded with younger workers. Yet, she sensed that some employers preferred the maturity and work ethic of older workers.

One night this idea came to her: "What if there were a temporary employment service just for seniors? I wonder if I could make a living by providing the kind of help that I needed?"

Duncan did. She teamed with Larry Brady, an ex-stockbroker friend, to found Senior Skills: a temporary employment service for workers 55 and older. Today, she and Brady operate a thriving business. It's demanding work, as they struggle to promote a new idea. But recently they received a national award for their efforts. And along the way, they found time to get married.

For John Hickenlooper, the transition to a new career began in his 30s. Hickenlooper was a geologist in Denver when the energy industry crashed in the late 1980s. First the industry faltered, as a few branch offices in Denver consolidated with headquarters back in Houston. Then it slid like an avalanche. Twenty thousand geologists lost their jobs in Denver in one year alone. Soon Hickenlooper found himself with nothing to show for his career but a diploma on the wall and a severance package.

John had been an amateur home-brewer back in college. It was a hobby he'd enjoyed but never thought he could be paid for. But here was a new kind of business: the bar and grill with its own microbrewery. "Hey," he thought after a few brews in San Francisco. "Why not?"

Hickenlooper recognized that his graduate degree in geology was unmarketable, but he had no idea what else to do. He took a trip to San Francisco to visit his brother and clear his head. That's when he encountered his first brew pub. John had been an amateur homebrewer back in college. It was a hobby he'd enjoyed but never thought he could be paid for. But here was a new kind of business: the bar and grill with its own microbrewery. "Hey," he thought after a few brews in San Francisco. "Why not?"

When he returned to Denver, Hickenlooper used his geological library research skills to explore the growing industry of microbreweries. Then he enrolled in some small business development skills and developed a business plan. Before long, he was out raising capital for Colorado's first brew pub, the Wynkoop Brewery.

It wasn't easy to sell his idea. Hickenlooper approached his mother as an investor and she turned him down flat. But his former Little League baseball coach put up $10,000.

Today, Hickenlooper looks back on his venture with mixed feelings. Starting a new business has taken almost all his time. "My life the last few years hasn't been a lot of fun," he admits.

But the brew pub is a success. The

Wynkoop has expanded to include a jazz night club and an upscale billiards parlor. Located in a renovated warehouse in historic Lower Downtown Denver, the pub is just down the street from the site of Coors Field, the future stadium of Denver's new major league baseball team, the Colorado Rockies. It's a vibrant neighborhood, and the Wynkoop is at the center of the action.

It's clear to me that the American economy is in transition. What we see is not what we have to accept. The promise lies in rebuilding our society as an economy of entrepreneurs. And in that process, the people at the forefront are innovative risk-takers such as Joan and John.

What sets these people apart is their capacity for new learning. But they're not so different from the rest of us. We all have the capacity to move ahead in changing times, if we can keep ourselves alive as learners. For skills are the bridge to America's new economy.

Careers in a New Economy

For the rest of our careers, you and I will be working in the midst of an economic revolution.

We can't control the pace of a changing economy.

But we can try to grasp the shape and direction of change: the shift, for example, from pyramid to diamond-like organizations. Moreover, we can learn to grow with the times.

I believe it's important to have a sense of moving with the times, not only for our professional development but also for our peace of mind. We all need a sense of locomotion.

Business Week magazine once reported an interesting study of stress in race car drivers. It seems that some researchers at Emory University first measured drivers' stress levels when they were traveling 200 miles an hour out on the racetrack, then while they were waiting in pit stops as someone else serviced their cars.

Conclusion: the drivers experienced far more stress when they gave up control and sat idle.

It helps to have a sense of self-control.

Skills are the bridge to learning what comes next.

Several years ago when I was directing a career counseling program for alumni at the University of Denver, I developed a computer data bank to keep track of my clients according to their work experience and training.

One afternoon I was fooling around with the system and began scanning the files of some of the best computer science people in the program. I came up with three who had been especially successful. I printed out their records and spent some time studying them.

None of these individuals had a degree in computer science. One was a lawyer, one a business professional, and the other an ex-priest. But each of them had a degree in philosophy from a Jesuit university.

Suddenly the light went on. I saw the relevance of rigorous training in critical thinking to both philosophy and computer science.

Then there was Martha, a geologist. Martha originally had set out to be a landscape artist. Her family had spent vacations at the ocean, on the Delaware shore, and Martha loved to paint the seashore. She spent hours watching the changing tides and patterns in the sand. In time, she turned out some good watercolors, won a few awards, and took up art in college.

But she couldn't imagine making a living as an artist. Geology seemed to offer job security. So Martha went on for a degree in geology and then a master's in geophysics.

In the early 1980s in Denver, Martha was making $60,000 a year. The oil companies were into major exploration, and Martha was a gifted geophysicist.

Then the oil industry collapsed and 100,000 jobs were lost in Denver. Martha's employers kept her on as long as they could, hoping they'd resume exploration. But there was little work to fill her time.

Martha looked for ways to keep busy. She began learning more about her computer and got to know a systems analyst in the next department. He introduced her to some fascinating work that was going on systems analysis. The name of the new field intrigued her. They called it "pattern recognition." It was the same process used in painting, geology, and computer science.

While there's nothing wrong with crafting a good resume or polishing our interviewing techniques, job search skills are not the stuff of which careers are made. Skills are the basic ingredients. It's how to do a job, not how to get a job, that counts.

Today there's mounting interest in finding transferable skills in military careers as the nation's defense budget declines. About one-and-a-half million civilian and military defense jobs are slated to be eliminated during the next five years, and the process is already underway.

At Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, personnel officers came up with these observations in publicity for a job fair, "From Blue Suits to Pinstripes."

Even specialized military skills such as bomb loading may be transferable as the Air Force sees it: "An Air Force bomb loader could go from managing a supply inventory involving millions of dollars of bombs to overseeing a warehouse full of furniture."

Helping military personnel identify and build on their transferable skills is much more effective than simply offering workshops on job search skills, as they've done in the past.

While there's nothing wrong with crafting a good resume or polishing our interviewing techniques, job search skills are not the stuff of which careers are made. Skills are the basic ingredients. It's how to do a job, not how to get a job, that counts.

The other problem with emphasizing job search strategies is that many books in the field are keyed to the old pyramid corporate organizations. They teach techniques, such as writing persuasive cover letters or "dressing for success," that are designed to impress someone higher up in some hierarchy — someone who has a job for us.

In fact, however, given the reality of today's entrepreneurial, small business economy, there are few jobs awaiting any of us out there. Instead, most good jobs today are co-created.

Jobs are joint ventures in problem-solving. They're strategies to solve pressing problems in organizations: frequently more than one problem at a time. For example, consider these cases of two other prospective employers.

■ Sue Langhorn is station manager of KRUD, an all-talk radio station in Slackjaw, Oklahoma. The station converted from Country Western to an all-talk format several years ago when Slackjaw's energy industry was booming. Throngs of business professionals had moved in from the East Coast, and most of them preferred news-

radio to Eddie Rabbitt.

But today the station is in trouble. Population has dropped off as the oil boom went bust. Local businesses are struggling. Listener ratings at KRUD are abysmal, and advertising revenue is falling.

KRUD was sold to a new owner who inherited a long-term lease in Slackjaw's tallest office building. The lease is a fixed cost from back in the days when business was booming, and the owner finds he can't renogiate it.

The one variable cost the new owner could find was salaries. So he let all his news reporters go. Then he called Sue in and instructed her to come up with other programming ideas. She hasn't slept much since.

Sue knows the all-talk format is a given, since the station has a weak signal. If they were to broadcast music, they couldn't reach the suburbs of Slackjaw. Besides, the majority of advertisers are local firms with an interest in local news coverage. They need all the business information they can get.

The problem is gathering the news with no reporters. Sue sits at her desk and looks down at the floor. Her office is cluttered with local newspapers and business magazines: lots of news, but in the wrong format. What to do? Sue sits in her high rise office and gazes at the horizon.

■ Ned Benson had never heard of a PRP, until he became one. Benson is president of NB Tiling, a building-products company founded by his father. He began working in the business during high school, then set off for college and an MBA. Ned has solid credentials in his industry; he's a good business manager.

But for the past several years he's been spending less time with his business and more time worrying about the local dump. The problem began with a protest by the Sierra Club over some toxic materials found in the bellies of a few dead ducks. Then a chemist had identified the substance. It was an effluent from NB Tiling. The ducks had eaten it at the dump.

Ned was familiar with the substance, but he'd never understood how or where his employees disposed of it. Now the Environmental Protection Agency has identified his company as a "Potentially Responsible Party" for conditions at the dump. As Ned has learned, that's a legal term in Superfund legislation, with fines that can run up to six figures. Anyone who has ever made a deposit in a polluted site can be indicted as a PRP.

Ned Benson had never heard of a PRP, until he became one. .... Now the Environmental Protection Agency has identified his company as a "Potentially Responsible Party" for conditions at the dump. As Ned has learned, that's a legal term in Superfund legislation, with fines that can run up to six figures.

Ned has begun to look for help with his new problem. He has a few staff people trained in chemistry, and a corporate attorney. But no one seems equipped to work at the boundaries of business management, environmental science, and law.

The solutions to problems such as Sue's and Ned's often must be co-created. They're multiple problems that call for more than one perpsective. That's why many employ-

ers use the interview process to expore fresh approaches to their problems with prospective employees.

For example, if Sue were to interview local English teachers or newspaper reporters, she might come up with a job for someone who could re-write articles in print so that they could be read on the air, using simple sentences and short words. Were she to find a writer with a good speaking voice, that person might double as an announcer.

Ned might begin looking for lawyers trained in the sciences, or a biologist with an MBA — both by advertising a job description and scouring universities that offer degree programs in environmental management or health. He also might sign up for a course in hazardous substance management sponsored by the National Environmental Health Association.

Sarah Edwards, one of the nation's leading authorities on home-based businesses, entered that field and completely revamped her skills because of a powerful personal experience.

While both situations may sound daunting, they're also typical of the way jobs in this changing economy are created every day. The best new jobs are multi-problem positions that call for innovative solutions and unconventional combinations of skills.

Just as jobs are joint ventures, employers are partners in the problem-solving process. Much as we're accustomed to thinking of a prospective employer as a fatherly fellow who's prone to hire the candidate with the best-shined shoes, nowadays that's mostly not the case. Employers are more like partners in a joint venture.

A career is a continuing education. The bottom-line benefit in most jobs is what we learn, not what we earn. As an instructor in aviation mechanics told me the other day, "Our field is changing so fast that a diploma is nothing but a license to keep on learning."

That's why a good short term strategy in seeking employment is to look for a good learning environment in an industry where one wants to be — even if the first available job isn't one where you want to stay. The point is to hire on and learn the ropes in a good learning community.

Sometimes the mix of skills we learn is dictated by the labor market. That was true of Marsha and Larry McVey, who found themselves managing apartments as a result of a bad real estate investment. Their expertise in residential management was essentially a strategy for economic survival.

Other times, the skills people develop seem driven by their values. Sarah Edwards, one of the nation's leading authorities on home-based businesses, entered that field and completely revamped her skills because of a powerful personal experience.

In the late 1960s, Sarah was a social worker employed by the federal government in Kansas City, Missouri. She served as a regional consultant to Head Start programs and was constantly on the go, flying to meet clients all over the Midwest. At the same time, she was occupied with maintaining a home for herself and her husband, Paul, and their two-year-old son.

It was a stimulating lifestyle, till one day she collapsed. "I'd thought I was doing fine," she remembers, "but my body didn't agree."

Sarah was hospitalized with a kidney infection, so run-down that she almost died. When the doctor came to see her, he

said, "We almost lost you last night. I want you to know that your illness is lifestyle-related. You are doing yourself in."

That conversation caught her attention, but didn't provide a solution to her problem. "Here I had a career and a husband and a child, and I didn't have any idea how I was going to juggle all of this," she says.

One night she had a meeting with another consultant at his office, which turned out to be in his home. "He seemed to have an incredibly comfortable life," she recalls. "Here we were meeting in his conference room, along with his dog."

Sarah began to consider how she might work out of her own home. Eventually she went back to school to become licensed as a clinical social worker, then opened a psychotherapy practice in a home-based office. Before long, Paul joined her. An attorney who ran a research and consulting firm in downtown Kansas City, he relocated his business to another room in their home.

> ***"I'd thought I was doing fine, but my body didn't agree. Here I had a career and a husband and a child, and I didn't have any idea how I was going to juggle all of this."***

Today the Edwardses are full-time consultants to other home-based, "open collar" workers across the nation. Authors of four books, they also write a magazine column, host a network radio program, and manage a Working From Home forum for 25,000 subscribers on Compuserve. That's in addition to conducting a constant round of lectures and seminars.

Schools, professional associations, and other learning organizations are wonderful places to network — especially if we're unemployed. That's a time when most of us need all the support we can get when it comes to making connection.

Sometimes I think of that problem as the Senior Prom Syndrome. Remember how it felt when you had to get a date to a big dance? Looking back on that teenage trauma, it's a wonder we all weren't undone by it.

The reason we survived was that dating had a context. Getting dates was only one strand in the larger fabric of high school life. We made contact with the opposite sex and got clues as to who might be available as we mingled in the halls each day at school. High school provided a support system for traumatic events such as finding a date to the prom.

As adults, our needs are not so different. We all still need some systems of support and points of connection with others. The difference is that, as we grow up, those contacts are harder to come by. In adulthood we're much more isolated.

That's one of the strongest arguments I know for pursuing some course of study when we're unemployed: not just to learn new skills, but to make contact with others whose interests are leading them in a similar direction. Learning is the leading edge of our experience, and education is a source of community.

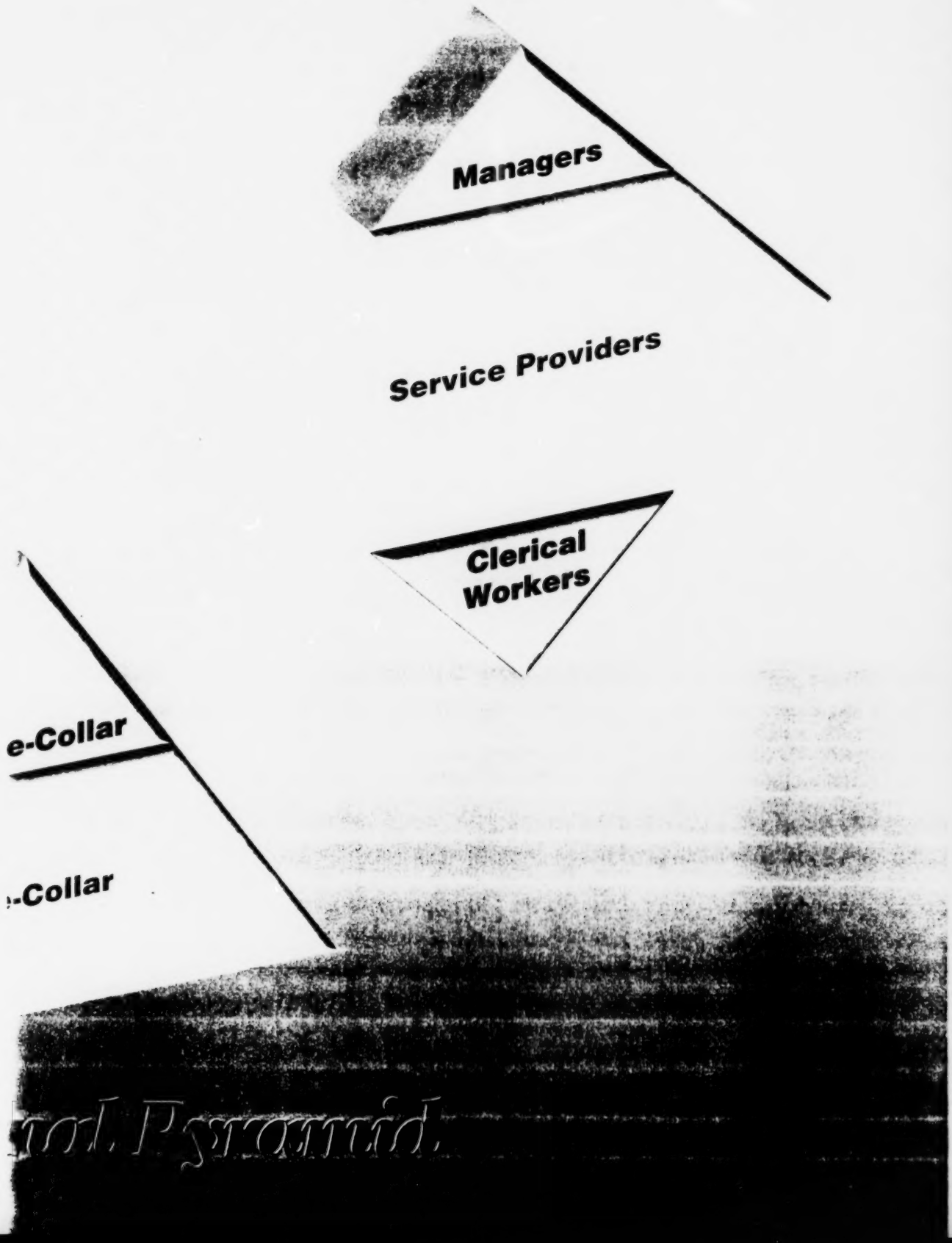
The basic questions in every career are:

- What needs doing?
- What can you do? and
- What have you been learning?

The 33% Equation

Each year in America:

The Emerging Diamond



Pyramids to Diamonds: How the Workplace Is Changing

It's hard to make career decisions in changing times — not that it's ever been easy. Even in periods of economic stability, careers aren't static. People can outgrow their work. Elementary school teachers and pediatricians may find they're less motivated to work with small children once their own kids are grown and gone. Dancers need new careers when their legs go.

Not only do the needs we bring to work change, but the workplace shifts as well.

Set your sights on a job as a sushi chef, and suddenly the American taste for Japanese food sours. Learn to program in Unix and the computer undustry turns to Ada.

That's what it's like to make plans in the midst of an economic revolution.

For that's what we're living through today. Whatever people say about an economic recession, what we really have in this country is a radical revision of the way we're doing business. It's a change in the rules of the game: not unlike the day in 1823 when a student at the English boarding school of Rugby lost his head in the middle of a soccer match. Instead of kicking the ball, he picked it up and ran with it. Everyone else had such a good time chasing him down and tackling him that they invented the sport of rugby. Like today's economic change, that was a revolution.

For some time now, I've been aware of three pronounced trends that seem to be affecting most people's working lives:

- the shift from pyramid to diamond-like organizations
- from specialized careers to new jobs for generalists
- with new suport systems in reorganized labor.

I first recognized the diamond-shaped organization when I was conducting a study of employment trends in Colorado a few years ago. I'd developed a questionnaire to find out the principal kinds of jobs found in key industries within our state.

As I interviewed employers in these fields — everyone from hospital directors to hotel managers — I asked about the levels of workers they employed. 1) How many were full-time executives and managers? 2) How many were directly involved in producing goods or delivering a service? 3) How many were in clerical or custodial jobs?

The pattern emerged slowly, but it was clear. In most organizations, the great majority of jobs were in the second category; most employees were producers of goods or services. They were customer service representatives, for example, or consulting engineers.

They were not full-time managers: vice presidents of this or that. Most of the orga-

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nizations I surveyed had cut management staff to the core. Not many people were paid just to supervise the work of someone else.

Nor were there many support staff jobs at the low end of the scale. Some companies employed no clerical support staff at all. For example, a regional airline based in Denver has no secretaries to type and take dictation. Everyone in the organization is required to use word processing for their correspondence, spread sheet software for their budgeting, and similar computer applications.

These new organizations were shaped like diamonds. They were thick in the middle with service providers and other workers who produced revenue while supervising themselves, and thin at the bottom and the top.

Twenty or 30 years ago, most major companies were shaped like pyramids. They were thick at the bottom and narrow at the top.

Those were organizations that people could enter through low level jobs with minimal skills, and work their way up. Careers were based on the familiar blue-collar to white-collar ladder.

Corporate pyramids were tiered. The lowest jobs were for blue collar workers who were directly involved in production. They made things with their hands.

To progress in a pyramid, one worked up into the ranks of white collar positions. Those were the jobs for supervisors and managers who no longer had to work their hands but supervised others who did. In a typical corporation there were about half as many white collar as blue collar jobs.

Life in a pyramid organization was a lot like the military. You entered as a private, then made corporal, and on up through the rungs.

For 25 years or so following World War II, the American corporate economy with its stratified organizations was very successful. This period — from 1945 to about 1970 — marked the greatest economic expansion in the history of the world.

Like any powerful institution, the corporate pyramid made a deep impression on the values of our entire society. That's why most people who grew up in the corporate era still value upward mobility at a gut level and secretly hope to find themselves climbing up some sort of ladder in their careers.

Every week or so I run into an ex-corporate employee who's now working as an independent consultant, with a business card that identifies him as Joe Schmo: President of Joe Schmo Associates. Sometimes he's also listed as the CEO. That's the power of the ladder in our minds.

The other relic of the old corporate ladder is the aversion many Americans have for manual work. They're drawn to white collar professions where people work with their heads, not their hands. But those professions, like jobs for corporate middle

In most organizations, most employees were producers of goods or services. They were not full-time managers: vice presidents of this or that. Most of the organizations I surveyed had cut management staff to the core. Not many people were paid just to supervise the work of someone else.

managers and Chief Executive Officers, are crumbling like the pyramids; there are fewer and fewer traditional white collar jobs around.

Consider a few examples.

Law. A 1991 article in the Washington Post reported that 44 percent of the nation's 250 largest law firms had cut staff during the previous year. The pattern prevailed across the United States in every major city, in every major city except (you guessed it) Washington, D.C.

Architecture. An estimated 25 percent of architects in several major American cities — principally on the East Coast — are unemployed. Similar figures apply to public relations: 25 percent unemployment, nationwide. The same pattern can be found in other white collar business specialties such as strategic planning.

> ***Like any powerful institution, the corporate pyramid made a deep impression on the values of our entire society. That's why most people who grew up in the corporate era still value upward mobility at a gut level and secretly hope to find themselves climbing up some sort of ladder in their careers.***

But, despite the scarcity of corporate jobs, we continue to spawn white collar specialists. Law school enrollment is at an all-time high (129,580 at last count), and MBAs are multiplying like rabbits. That's not to say that the education these people have received is without value. Most specialized academic fields are personally enriching: it's stimulating to be able to think like a lawyer, conceive designs as an architect, or plan a media campaign as a public relations specialist might do.

The problem is finding work in white collar professions. Many highly-trained professionals have relied upon large corporate employers to employ them in specialized niches such as managerial development or strategic planning. But today the corporate economy is fading. Analysts estimate that America has lost one million corporate white collar jobs a year recently, and that one-third of all middle management jobs are history.

The day of the protective corporate employer is past. We're living in a time when jobs are joint ventures, employers are partners, and careers are continuing education. It's a day of transition and a time for new learning.

Lifelong Learning

Learning is as natural as breathing. Watch an infant develop. See the incredible range of competencies of a two-year-old, and it's impossible to doubt that human beings have a strong interest in acquiring new skills. It's a need that doesn't diminish with age.

But adult learning is complicated; as grown-ups we have other roles and responsibilities in our lives. Beyond that, there are tough choices involved in continuing one's education. What if the skills we learn should land us in a dead-end job? Or in no job at all?

We've all heard stories of professionals who quit their jobs to earn an advanced degree, then ended up as parking lot cashiers after graduation.

Today there's a host of colleges with special degree programs for working adults. Add to that the many other learning

options outside schools, and it's no wonder that adult learners face some pretty perplexing choices.

What do these world-famous authors have in common: Stephen Crane, Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald?

The answer is: all of them flunked out of college.

David Kolb, a social psychologist, became interested in learning styles when he served as an academic advisor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. .

Kolb noticed that many bright students dropped out of MIT not because they couldn't do the work required but because they learned in a different manner from the engineers who ran the school. He went on to study the various ways in which specialists in different fields pursue learning. Some interesting differences turned up.

He found that engineers tend to follow a very concrete learning style; they like questions that can be answered right-or-wrong. Social workers, on the other hand, do better with creative material such as case studies, rather than taking black-or-white, true-or-false exams.

Kolb's research suggests that all of us should pay attention to our comfort zones in learning. Be it small seminars or large lecture classes, independent study or on-the-job training, we each ought to find the mode that fits us best.

Some of us will do better in active styles, while others need time for quiet reflection. Wherever possible, we ought to negotiate for a style of learning that matches our strengths.

Kolb seems to view learning as a form of problem-solving. We learn in order to get past some impediment in our lives — whether it's setting up a computer or just crawling across the living room to pull down a lamp. He believes there are four phases in a typical problem-solving/learning cycle.

First, we perceive the problem to be solved, then we process what we've seen and heard to form a concept or theory of it. After that, we produce some sort of solution to the problem; and, finally, we promote our solution to the problem to others.

Just as we each have preferences in the four phases of the problem-solving cycle, so our skills also follow different patterns. We each tend to develop skills that follow our most comfortable style of learning. As a result, we develop distinctive weaknesses and strengths.

We need to recognize our strengths and get help in the areas where we're less comfortable: both in our work and in our learning.

> ***We're living in a time when jobs are joint ventures, employers are partners, and careers are continuing education. It's a day of transition and a time for new learning.***

Just as individuals differ in learning styles, so do professional groups. Professions tend to cultivate the same core competencies. That's why, when a profession changes, co-workers often have common learning needs.

One of the most interesting groups I've met with recently is an association of financial planners. The profession is scarcely 30 years old, but already it's changing radically.

Ten or twelve years ago, when personal

computers and spreadsheet software entered the field of financial planning, the planners and their clients became enamored of long-range investment schemes. Planners would gather all kinds of data from their clients, pour it all into their computers and spin out lifetime plans. That's when processing skills were in vogue.

But during the past five or six years, many of those long-range plans have gone up in smoke. That's because the economy has become so uncertain that cradle-to-grave financial schemes don't hold up as they once did. More people are in a survival mode, living month-to-month — just trying to get by.

The other new factor is that more Americans are living longer. As financial planners deal with aging clients, they find themselves asked to provide assistance with tasks of daily living, such as buying a car.

As a result, many of the financial planners find they're functioning more as social workers than analytical specialists. So they need to develop more sensitive, perceiving skills.

That's why some of the most dynamic learning today is occurring in professional associations.

Professional associations might play in today's changing economy roles similar to those of traditional organized labor. One of the first and best challenges is retraining.

All of which raises the question of academic credentials. In a society where there's so much informal learning in professional associations, franchising organizations, small business organizations, and even temporary employment services, do college and graduate degrees matter anymore?

The question is especially pertinent to cities such as Denver where there are more highly-credentialed white collar workers than white collar jobs. At last count, for example, 60 percent of the meter readers at the public utilities company held college degrees.

Meanwhile, colleges continue to shake the bushes for students, with all sorts of hokum: as in this brochure from the University of Colorado at Denver: "With a highly-prized University of Colorado degree, most students find they easily meet an employer's specific needs and their own career objective." Tell that to a meter reader with a college degree.

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Just how valuable is a college degree these days? Is it worth going back to school to get one?

On the one hand, it's important to note that more and more Americans have college degrees. In 1970, there were 11.8 million college grads in the U.S. By 1990, that number had increased almost threefold, to 32.5 million. The fastest-growing group of students was women aged 35 and older.

Another related argument is that college grads seem to be doing much better than non-grads. According to figures compiled by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston, the income gap between male college graduates and high school grads more than doubled between 1973 and 1986.

Paul Harrington, a labor economist at Northeastern, is quick to point out that

colleges may not be entirely responsible for the relative success of their graduates. "The main reason the rate of return is so good for college grads," he observes, "is that the labor market treats everyone else so bad."

Harrington believes that non-college graduates have suffered from the loss of "bridge jobs" in manufacturing — the kinds of jobs where people could learn basic skills and work their way up the ladder of pyramid organizations.

Look at the jobs in diamond organizations, and it's easy to see why more people are returning to college. The points of entry in those firms are not at the bottom of some work-your-way-up ladder, but in the middle of the organizations — where new workers must be able to hit the deck running, with marketable skills in place.

In recent years, colleges and universities have taken steps to recognize the skills that mature students bring to the classroom. Many mid-career adults now find they can receive academic credit for non-classroom learning through procedures known as "prior learning assessment." They can cut the time required to earn a degree and avoid sitting through classes they might be qualified to teach.

According to the National University Continuing Education Association, 97 percent of America's higher education institutions now grant credit for prior learning. But the methods they use differ, as do the amounts of credit they assign.

Those are two arguments for completing a college degree: more of our competitors in the workplace have one, and through prior learning assessment it's possible to earn credit for what one has learned in the school of hard knocks.

So it's possible to argue that anyone who can possibly earn a college sheepskin ought to.

The questions begin to surface when one considers the relationship between where today's college graduates are employed on the one hand and their major fields of study on the other. With the exception of a few occupations in the health sciences, it seems that college grads with the same degrees are scattered all over the map.

To cite just a few examples, according to the economists at Northeastern, only one journalism grad in four is employed in publishing five years after graduation, and only 17 percent of banking and finance grads are working in commercial banks.

Today it seems the basic purpose of a college education is to generate long-term generalists. That is, if one can leave college with enough skills to gain a foothold in some occupation learning to do research as a journalist, for example — then it may be possible to expand upon those skills as one shifts to other fields. A good education is one that enables a person to recycle skills repeatedly.

And I do mean "repeatedly." For, in most fields, higher education has become a lifelong process — whether or not one has a degree. A college education is not so much a possession as a process.

Non-college graduates have suffered from the loss of "bridge jobs" in manufacturing — the kinds of jobs where people could learn basic skills and work their way up the ladder of pyramid organizations.

That's especially evident in community colleges.

Today there are some 1200 community colleges across the country — enrollment has been growing twice as fast as in four-year colleges — and their mission is much more diverse.

The typical community college student today is 30 years of age (20 percent of entering students already have undergraduate degrees).

The main emphasis at most of these schools is providing technical training for occupations that require not four years but two years' worth of skills. That includes many of today's most promising jobs.

Don Goodwin calls the workers in these new two-year-training jobs "technoprofessionals." He believes they're vitally important to America's new economy.

Goodwin serves as president of the Texas State Technical College at Waco.

The college offers a dozen high-tech courses of study in everything from environmental studies to aeronautics.

The mission of the school is to produce graduates for a new class of jobs in advanced technology.

In 1991, the placement rate for TSTC-Waco grads was 86 percent. In high-tech programs it was 100 percent.

Today, in one field after another, some of the best-paying and most satisfying jobs involve skills drawn from the traditionally separate realms of manual and intellectual occupations. Neither blue collar nor white collar, they're jobs for new generalists.

Compare the earning potential and job security of these skilled technicians to traditional white collar professionals such as lawyers and architects, and it's evident there's no comparison. The outlook for technoprofessionals is much more favorable.

One reason for the shift to technical generalist jobs is the influence of advanced technology in all sorts of industries. Automotive technicians are paid to service on-board computers that have doubled the gas mileage cars got 20 years ago while drastically reducing pollution. There are more of these computers in many cars than on the earliest flights into space, which is why automotive maintenance has become such a high-tech occupation.

That's one reason we're seeing more generalists in the American workplace: because technology is changing. Another reason is the change I've noted in organizations, from corporate pyramids to diamond-shaped organizations. In today's flatter, more flexible firms, workers must perform a wide range of functions, independently.

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In choosing a college and deciding whether to earn a credential, it's helpful to do some good information interviewing among people who are working in the field one is thinking of entering. Professional associations are a good resource. So are major employers in the field.

Another good strategy is to try to get work experience in the field one is studying while a student. That's especially important if one is entering a new field.

Whether or not one is pursuing a degree, it's vitally important to find a learning place one enjoys.

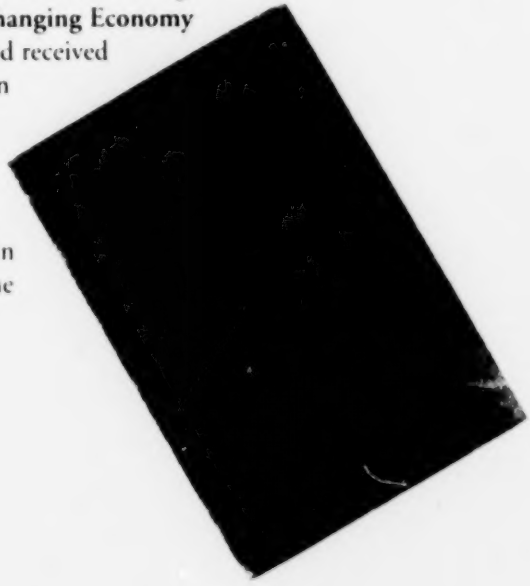
Education is not a one-size-fits-all exercise, as it may have been back in school. It's a basic human function that combines the "holy curiosity of inquiry" with the benefits of staying current. Lifelong learning is living fully in our time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Bill Charland is a nationally recognized authority on employment and job training in a changing economy. He writes a column on this subject for the *Scripps Howard News Service*, and is a frequent contributor to the *Christian Science Monitor.*

The founding director of the Professional Career Development program at the University of Denver, and of the University Without Walls program at Chicago State University, Mr. Charland has counseled more than a thousand adults on career-related issues.

He is the author of four books, the most recent being **Career Shifting: Starting Over in a Changing Economy** (Bob Adams, Inc. 1993). Mr. Charland received his undergraduate degree from Yankton College in South Dakota, a master's degree from Yale University, and a doctorate from the Chicago Theological Seminary. He is Senior Fellow for Employment and Training in the New Economy at the Center for the New West. Bill and his wife, Phoebe Lawrence, live in Denver.



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